

# Tr(e)ash(ure) Island

Reevaluating and Reimagining Our Relationship with Waste

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## REFLECTION

As my graduation year gradually approached, and with it the choice of topic for the diploma - I didn't feel that any of the offered studio topics called to me, but there was always a lingering idea in my head about - a floating trash island collecting trash from the ocean/seas, constantly growing, as it builds itself using the material it collects - and for some reason, I just couldn't let go of it. Why trash? Why an island? Why is there such constant movement throughout the oceans, with no fixed location? Although I couldn't pinpoint the answers, I had a strong motivation to explore this topic throughout my graduation year, and subsequently my motivations for doing so - and so I chose to do my Graduation Studio at the Explore Lab - which allowed me to explore the said fascination.

The idea that I wouldn't be playing a god-type-architect who designs something static and never changing, but instead a system that is ever-evolving, ever-changing, on its own, by its users - and I would just give the starting logic and means of its functioning - was something that I recognized as a big motivation in this idea.

However, in the reassessment of my motivations, another, deeper drive arose. The pressing challenges of climate change, the unrelenting chase of resources driven by capitalism, and the simultaneous depletion of both accessible and unexplored resources, including space exploration, all while worsening pollution on our planet, struck a deep chord with me, so maybe that was the key motive?

Contemplating the nature of waste, trash, garbage, I was struck by the contradiction that anything might become waste but nothing is genuinely waste. The difficult notion of waste therefore raised questions about when and why something becomes waste.

How to stop this whole perpetuating half-depressing story? Is it even manageable to stop it? Probably not. So in which way could the outlook on the whole story and the way we act about it change?

Ultimately, it was **the subject of waste** that pulled me in. The floating trash island became a captivating metaphor for this prevalent problem, but as I explored my motivations further, I found it was **waste** as the central issue driving this fascination and vision. Every other aspect I explored, from user-driven systems to the nature of resources, appeared as potential solutions or repercussions of the primary problem - **our relationship with waste**.

And exactly with all that in mind, I started the Research part of the Graduation Studio.

While researching the topic, as well as my motives for doing so, I allowed myself to explore different aspects of it, without being hyper-fixated on the initial idea of the traveling floating trash island (that motivated the whole research and graduation topic), as the one that has to be the final product of the graduation studio as well. While the island idea held initial appeal (and could still be made into a project), I recognized its limitations – the utopian vision ignored real-world challenges like weather and location dependence - that bring problems, as well as opportunities with them.

So, rather than focusing on the (potential) final result, I focused on my Research Question:

**How to design an aware collective with reevaluated (values and) conceptualization of waste, and its (lack of) value?**

+ subquestions

**If the current collective is the one creating waste, what kind of collective would it be that is creating *out* of waste?**

**What would it need to function and be able to create (product and itself)?**

My research encompassed both academic exploration and personal reflection. Through literature, self-examination, conversations with people in my life, and discussions with my research mentor, I gained a deeper understanding of waste production, perception, and its interconnectedness. Everything, I realized, has the potential to become waste, yet nothing is inherently valueless, waste. This fundamental shift in perspective extended beyond waste itself, influencing my entire worldview.

I presented the findings of the Research in my P2 presentation, with a vague idea of what the architectural manifestation of such findings could be. Additionally, I proposed a site for the project: an abandoned island in the IJ River, located in Amsterdam North. Interestingly, I later discovered that this island had previously been part of Amsterdam's incineration station (decommissioned approximately 30 years ago). While the site selection was initially intuitive, this subsequent revelation regarding its waste-related history felt serendipitous, aligning perfectly with the project's thematic focus on waste and giving it new values, as well as it being an island - it felt like a full circle moment, going back to the original vision that motivated this project in the first place - a trash island, changing our ways of relating to/with waste. The positive feedback received during P2 provided motivation to further develop the concept and translate it into a physical space.

The period between P2 and P3 involved a critical analysis of the project's newly defined physical parameters. The challenge was to combine the conceptual idea – the project's core purpose – with the practical considerations of the chosen site. As P3 approached, I felt overwhelmed and uncertain regarding the task of translating a semester's worth of conceptual research into a physical, tangible form, especially within a seemingly short timeframe. However, voicing these concerns to my mentors during P3 resulted in valuable understanding and support. This, in turn, allowed me to overcome my doubts and create a preliminary physical representation of the project, that I evolved in the following weeks, leading up to the finalized design that will be presented on the P4.

The design focuses on giving a space (and) solution that evokes a paradigm shift on what waste is, reconceptualizes it, and essentially stops it from becoming, or at least prolongs the time in which one becomes waste. By prolonging the lifespan of items, reevaluating consumption habits, and promoting sustainable behaviors, it is possible to mitigate the impact of waste (locally and globally). The focus therefore is not totally eliminating waste, but rather reducing its production and redefining the way society views waste, to stop, or realistically, slow its production and accumulation. The essence of the design lies in the creation of an environment that fosters an ethos of care and repair. It shows a community banding together to repair their possessions, to stop them from becoming labeled as waste. This space would give the possibility for these things to get new significance and value, but it would also prompt a thorough reevaluation of the accepted notion of waste. The aim was to provide a designed space where people can engage in these transformative activities, as well as come together to create a different, aware collective - and in doing so, I think that the final design gives (one of the possible) solutions to the Research Question.

By concentrating on the "front-end" of waste creation (prevention), instead of the "back-end" (recycling or incineration), it takes a proactive strategy that prioritizes prevention over reaction. The project proposes a novel approach that blends physical actions (such as bricolage and repair) with behavioral shifts, promoting self-awareness and encouraging a reevaluation of waste-related attitudes. This rethinking of waste as an abstract term with intrinsic value yields theoretical insights as well as practical reuse strategies. Ideally, by raising collective self-awareness and encouraging action, the project aims to contribute to a beneficial societal shift toward improved waste management.

For my graduation studio, (since it is going to be the last theoretical-without-too-heavy-consequences-if-I-fail type of project) I awarely and purposefully set myself up for a potential failure - choosing to explore an idea, conceptually, socially, without a predefined form, typology, scale, or even a concrete vision of the final product. Rather, I allowed myself to trust the process and the idea that somehow, somewhere along the line, I would eventually come to know "how", "where", "why", and "what" to do - architecturally - for my final graduation project. Choosing open-minded mentors further fueled this exploration. They actively challenged my assumptions, prompting even deeper self-reflection on my existing ideas, motives, and thought processes. This journey was not always linear. I managed to get lost, then found, then super lost, and kinda, maybe, I guess found again on several occasions - but in the end, I am writing this reflection as I am finishing a project of a building, with whom I am quite pleased how it turned out.

Throughout this exploration, I not only gathered practical knowledge such as architectural references, materials, and building technology solutions, but I also reevaluated a wide range of personal and professional viewpoints, thoughts, and concepts - architectural, psychological, social, economical, philosophical. Looking back, I wouldn't alter a thing about my choices - the mentors I chose, the studio, or the topic of my graduation project. This was not meant as flattery, but rather as an honest reflection of how these choices brought me to the most impactful year of my education.